affairs of the heart

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by nightcalling

Summary

> They've been at it for over an hour already, and Rosie still can't stay on his bicycle long enough to travel in a straight line for more than five seconds. Getting him to ride a single revolution took the better part of the sunlight that's left. At this rate, it'll be too dark to try turning left and right. Gravity, it would appear, is Rosie's mortal enemy on the ground, but not in the sky.
>
> Harry is perplexed.

Or, Rosie asks Croz for a favor.

Notes

WELL. i had been writing a different fic for them entirely when i was reminded of the anecdote of rosie being terrible at riding bicycles, and after seeing the photo of rosie and croz with the bikes, this was born.

there's no specific timeframe referenced in this fic, but in my mind, it fits best before d-day (so april/may 1944-ish). i imagine the real-life rosie learned to ride a bike when he was still a lieutenant, but i'm gonna pretend that my rosie avoided doing it until way later for my selfish purposes. please suspend your disbelief long enough to accept that they'd have time for any of these shenanigans. since i didn't plan for this to balloon to 9k and hence didn't think about the ramifications on canon until i was lost in the sauce, croz is not married to jean or involved with sandra in this.

my eternal love and gratitude to Cunninglinguist for listening to my ramblings about these two and cheering me on throughout the process of writing!!!

edit 4/24/24: replaced some phrases/slang that didn't exist in the 1940s!

See the end of the work for more notes

Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal is the kind of man who doesn't ask for things. He fixes. He's a fixer. Base morale is low, he single-handedly boosts it with his short but inspirational speeches. Gentle eye contact and reassuring pats on the back for all, more effective than seeing a pretty dame.

Being the mysteriously close-vested person that Rosie is, Harry figures a fella can't be blamed for staring rude and bug-eyed when Rosie strolls up to him one lovely evening in the Officers' Club and says, seriously, "I need a favor."

"Oh god, are you dying?" Harry blurts out.

Rosie startles, stiffening on the spot, which is how Harry knows he's jumped to conclusions; Rosie is never startled. A glance at the table next to them, and it's obvious that Lieutenants Mason and Farley have latched onto their short exchange with interest, openly whispering with incredulous looks.

That's not a good sign. The pair could write tabloids with the connections they have. Harry's pretty sure he's seen a few distributed copies of typed columns detailing the comings and goings of some senior officers who shall not be named.

Rosie, bless his impermeable soul, turns to the lieutenants to nod and acknowledge their attention. It's not meant to be stern, Harry thinks, but he wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of Rosie's raised eyebrows.

Once the pair has decided, graciously, to move on to the topic of Colonel LeMay's speech mannerisms and leave Harry's nerves in peace, Rosie turns back to him.

"No, Croz," Rosie says, wry. "I'm not dying."

Harry lets out a big exhale that vibrates his entire chest. "Jesus. You scared the shit out of me, Rosie."

"Sorry," Rosie says, not sounding sorry at all. He settles onto Harry's armrest, hip cocked, thigh pressing against Harry's upper arm. "But I do need a favor."

Harry studies him over a sip of whiskey. Now that he knows there's nothing wrong with Rosie physically, he shifts his state of mind from worried to suspicious. Rosie is highly regarded around the base,

practically a Sunday strip superhero, so people tend to think that he's all business, particularly the fresh-faced replacements that bounce in every so often (too often, in Harry's opinion). Well, Harry is one of the lucky few who knew Rosie before he became Rosie the Indomitable—for every serious expression, there's a corny joke or two waiting to be unleashed upon unsuspecting ears.

"Is this a prank?" Harry says, peering around the club. On occasion, Blakely and Douglass like to pull a fast one on him. Ever since they got him drunk out of his mind and lured him into belting 'White Christmas' in front of half of the Bloody Hundredth, he's upped his vigilance.

Rosie sighs, uncharacteristically dejected. "Regrettably," he says, blue eyes as clear as a summer's day, "no."

"You're yanking my chain," Harry says. Everyone knows how to ride a bicycle. Hell, even he learned by the time he was in grade school. That's quite an accomplishment considering his horrid sense of balance.

"No, I'm not," Rosie says, patient.

"You're doing a bit as a dare."

"No again."

Harry counts the days in his mind. "How'd you manage until now?"

"I walked," Rosie says, dry.

"You walked," Harry repeats incredulously, "everywhere, for six months."

Rosie shrugs. "I like walking. I like seeing the sights."

What sights? Harry thinks. All he's noticed are tired souls and dry plains for miles. Maybe the occasional hare or two.

"Why me?" he says.

"Because I've seen you ride and you don't fall off."

"So do a hundred other people!" Harry points at a swarm of officers

riding by in two-by-two formation. They'd relocated to the front of the club, once it became evident that this conversation required some fresh air. "Those guys, right there!"

Rosie sighs. Harry doesn't recall ever hearing Rosie sigh this frequently in a 24-hour span. "Look, if I knew who else to ask, I would've asked them."

"Oh, great," Harry says, feeling a pang of hurt for absolutely no reason.

"But the truth is, I don't want to ask anyone else. You're my friend, Croz. I trust you."

"Oh," Harry says. The pang of hurt disappears as quickly as it had come; in its place, warmth blossoms through his chest. "Great."

"So you'll help me?" Rosie says, hopeful.

"Great. Uh, I mean—yeah. Yes, I'll help you. Happy to." Harry stands up straight; he'd been slouching against the wall. "So, uh—how do you want to do this?"

"Not falling off the seat would be a start."

"Wow." Harry chuckles at the image of Rosie landing head-over-heels. "Well, I've gotta tell you, a lot of it is just keeping the beast between your legs so it doesn't run off on you."

Jesus, that sounded dirtier than he had intended. He takes another big sip of whiskey and hopes the combination of alcohol and dim lighting won't make his blush look too conspicuous. He's not sure why he's so out of it—his head is dizzy and he's not even on a plane, seconds from hurling his guts.

The Rosie effect, he supposes. The Buckys garnered this sort of response too, when they were around, but Harry is impervious to that type of charisma. They're legendary, but a bit too Hollywood glamor for his taste.

On the other hand, Rosie's got that easy-going charm. A comforting presence that feels like a good friend's embrace. Makes you want to know him better.

So that's what this is: an activity to get to know Rosie better.

"Do you have a day in mind?" Harry says, once he's calmed down. He waves his glass in the air. "Out of our extremely open schedule?"

Rosie shoots him a look, taking a second to think. "What about after supper—around 1800?"

"Tomorrow?" Harry says, surprised.

"Why not? We're not flying." Rosie pauses. "But I shouldn't assume that you'll want to—"

"1800 works," Harry quickly says. He's rewarded with Rosie giving him a pleased smile. "Where?"

"How about I meet you next to the pond on the other side of base?"

"Where the supply huts are?"

"That's the one."

"Isn't that a little…" Harry trails off, buying himself time to think. He takes no issue with the location—there's privacy, plus a looped path around the pond, perfect for their needs—but something about spending a few hours with Rosie in a secluded area, just the two of them, makes him feel kind of…

Well. He's not sure. But it makes him feel something.

"Far?" he says, finally.

Rosie drinks from his cola bottle, lips pursed around the opening. "Is it?"

Emotions sit thick in Harry's throat. He swallows, to no avail. "No, I suppose not," he says, looking away.

"Tomorrow, then." Rosie clinks his bottle against Harry's glass. "Looking forward to it, professor."

Harry watches Rosie disappear back inside the club, presumably to get a refill. While waiting, he traces the rim of his glass with his thumbs. His hands are shaking. His heart is beating fast. His throat is still stuck; with what, he doesn't know. "I'm not a professor?" True, but not what he wants to say.

Absent-minded, he puts his mouth to his glass, only to realize that he's also in need of a refill.

So much for calming down.

He miscalculated. This is going to take a lot longer than a few hours.

"If you stay upright, you won't fall!" Harry calls out, hands cupped around his mouth.

"Oh really?" Rosie calls back from the other side of the pond, teetering dangerously close to the edge. "That's news to me!"

They've been at it for over an hour already, and Rosie still can't stay on his bicycle long enough to travel in a straight line for more than five seconds. Getting him to ride a single revolution took the better part of the sunlight that's left. At this rate, it'll be too dark to try turning left and right. Gravity, it would appear, is Rosie's mortal enemy on the ground, but not in the sky.

Harry is perplexed.

"Fuck!" Rosie shouts, and there he goes again, toppling onto the ground in a heap.

Rosie the Indomitable, foul-mouthed and out of control. What a sight.

"That was better," Harry says, walking over, hands in his pockets.

Rosie glares at him as he snatches his pilot's hat and screws it back onto his head. His tie is askew, and his uniform is stained with dirt—a whole goddamn mess by Rosie's standards.

Harry steps past him to pick up the bicycle. "Come on," he says, holding out his hand. After a beat, Rosie takes it, expression softening, and Harry pulls him up.

Once Rosie is reseated, Harry says, "Hands on the handles."

Rosie obeys, giving Harry the fierce rush of confidence he needs to place both hands over Rosie's and start guiding him along the path as he walks next to him, step by step.

"Something my mom did with me," Harry explains, when Rosie stares at him, legs dangling lifelessly. He's not even pedaling; Harry can tell because he's straining enough as it is, trying to keep them both from falling over.

Is this strange? Maybe this is too silly for two grown men. He clears his throat, jerking his head ahead.

"Eyes on the road," he mutters.

Rosie stares at him for another long second before refocusing, legs back in action. But he keeps wobbling, even though Harry is holding on as firmly as he can. There must be something that he isn't doing right. Maybe Rosie's distributing his weight wrong; maybe Rosie's thinking instead of doing what he does best, which is letting his instincts take over.

Harry frowns when Rosie swerves again. "What if you try—"

"I've got it."

"But what if—"

"I've got it," Rosie says, pedaling faster, forcing Harry into a slow jog just to keep up.

"Can you slow down?" he says, narrowly avoiding a stone on the path. "I'm just trying to—"

"I said I've got it!" Rosie snaps, and Harry doesn't even get the chance to feel any sort of way about it because that's when he slips on an ill-placed pile of leaves and somersaults into the pond, elegant as a newborn duckling, taking Rosie out in the process and landing on him with an *oomf*.

Hey, at least they're head-over-heels together.

They've also taken a blow to their dignity, so there's that.

Harry resurfaces from being face-planted in the water, laughing as he brushes his hair back. "I'm glad nobody was around to see that," he says, spitting out a leaf. He wipes his eyes with his soggy rag of a sleeve, squinting through the mud. "Are you okay?"

Wide-eyed, Rosie blinks up at him. He's on his back, sprawled on all fours, pilot's hat exchanged for a lily pad. Perfect hair undone, curls springing across his forehead, water dripping onto his nose, his lips. Uniform and all, he's soaked clean through. He's also quite red in the face, which is the main reason why Harry has stopped laughing.

Shit, is Rosie developing a fever? Can fevers even happen that fast?

Harry hopes to God he hasn't just gotten the most important man in the Bloody Hundredth sick.

Praying diligently to whoever can hear him, he places the back of his hand against Rosie's forehead. He's not a nurse or a doctor, but he can take a temperature; he did it a lot when his mother was sick.

Hmm. Definitely warmer than would be considered normal, but that could be Rosie's natural body heat making up for the difference. The water is rather tepid. Harry is soaked himself, but he doesn't feel a thing, not even when the breeze picks up and blows past his ears.

"Croz," Rosie says. His voice is a little high-pitched. "What are you doing?"

Harry flips his hand around, pressing firmly against Rosie's forehead. "Making sure you're not going to pass out on me."

"I didn't know you were that kind of doctor."

"I'm not any kind of doctor yet," Harry says. Rosie's still running warm, but he doesn't appear to be having trouble making quips at Harry's expense, so he's probably all right. Harry drops his hand, satisfied.

Rosie shifts underneath him. "We should, um…"

Harry follows Rosie's gaze to where his thighs are straddling Rosie's lap.

Ah.

Embarrassed, he springs to his feet, fast as lightning. In his effort to look anywhere else, he locates a wheel poking out of the water a few feet away from them, spinning slowly where it's partially hidden among cattails.

"Hey, over here!" he says, waddling over. Good thing the pond isn't that deep; they'd be in serious trouble if it was. Circling around, he realizes it's the back wheel that's visible. The bicycle itself is upside down. "Shit."

Rosie splashes up next to him, hat in hand. "Something the matter?"

"It's stuck in the mud," Harry says, pointing.

Rosie grabs the handles, tries giving them a little shake. No dice.

"Well," he says, placing his hands on his hips. "Shit."

They glance at each other, laughter bursting out in unison. Rosie looks all out of sorts, and Harry's sure he isn't much better.

"All right, all right," Rosie says, after he's gathered himself; not Harry, though—he's still cackling from the fact that Rosie's floppy hair makes him look like a drenched poodle. He says as much, which earns him a kick to the shin.

"Ow," Harry complains.

"You deserved that," Rosie says, rolling up his damp sleeves. "Now, enough joking around. Help me out here."

Harry rolls his eyes. If Rosie hadn't gone rogue and started pedaling like he was being chased by a lion, they wouldn't be in this mess. But he holds his tongue, positioning himself where Rosie directs him. Together, they haul the bicycle out of the pond: Harry holding the wheel, and Rosie pushing the handles.

Once they've successfully rescued the bicycle from the pond's clutches, Rosie dusts off his hands, pat pat. Harry doesn't know why he'd bother; all he did was spread the muck around.

"We make a good team," Rosie declares.

"If that were true, we wouldn't be wet in the first place." Harry shakes out his sopping sleeves, making a face. This is going to be a pain in the ass to clean.

"Ah," Rosie says, waving him off. "It was a good bonding exercise."

Harry finds a grin for him, feeling warm despite the chill settling in. "With luck, this will be the only time you crash," he says, then grimaces. Why the hell would he say that? He's likely jinxed it, put some bad omen out there that they didn't need.

Rosie meets his eyes but doesn't say anything, only nods once. Then, for lack of a better word, he starts stripping. Right out here in the open.

"Uh," Harry says, as Rosie shucks off his uniform jacket with practiced ease. "What are you doing?"

"Trying not to catch a cold," Rosie says, practical as ever. He makes

quick work of his tie and uniform shirt, then moves on to his pants, stepping out of them and revealing long, pale legs. Harry feels compelled to look away; peculiar, considering that's not a reaction he's ever had. Between sharing quarters and splitting showers, they see each other in all stages of indecency. He's become acquainted with countless private parts to the point that he's become desensitized—they're just human bodies, after all.

But for some reason, watching Rosie undress with nothing else to look at is making his head spin.

"Can't we just, uh." Harry searches in the deep recesses of his mind for a way to finish the sentence. He might be the one developing a fever. "Go back?"

Rosie peers at him, now stripped down to his undershirt and his skivvies—both white, which leaves little to the imagination. "I don't want to explain to everyone why I look like a wet dog. Do you?"

Shoot. The man's got a point.

"I suggest you do the same before you start sneezing," Rosie says. He's hanging his clothes on a nearby tree, as if he's back in his Brooklyn apartment doing laundry. Shake out the item, drape it over the pole.

Luckily for them, they picked a warm day to fall into a pond. Harry loosens his tie and follows suit. His clothes look shrunken next to Rosie's; shorter jacket, shorter sleeves, shorter pants.

After he's finished, he sits down on the grass an arm's length away from Rosie, who's chosen to lounge against the tree trunk with one leg crossed in front of the other. Even though they're in identical states of undress, Harry feels oddly exposed. Uneasy. Like someone's torn open his stomach and put a feather to his insides, tickling him all over.

"You know what?" Rosie says. "This reminds me of the flak house."

Harry looks at where Rosie is looking: a pair of butterflies perched on a blade of grass at the edge of the pond. "You hated the flak house."

"I didn't hate it." Rosie tilts his head. "Not the entire time," he amends. "It was… educational. Peaceful."

"Too peaceful, according to you," Harry says. He gets it. He would've felt the same, knowing that there are good men out there laying down their lives while he's sitting in a bathrobe sipping wine. Hell, he'd

walk barefoot all the way back to base if it meant he could return to work.

Rosie is quiet, so Harry lies down with his head pillowed on his arms, figuring the conversation is over. A breeze cards through the grass, through his drying hair. He wouldn't say he's fond of England per se—much too rainy for his liking—but when the temperatures are high enough, it reminds him of that precious sliver of time before it turns to springtime in Iowa City.

Brooklyn can be volatile throughout the year, he's heard. A right-on piñata of weather conditions. He wonders if Rosie prefers the sun or the rain. Rosie had talked about training in Texas before, so maybe he's a hot weather, hot summer kind of guy. It would suit him. Or maybe such trivial matters are mere details to him—scorching heat or gloomy rain clouds, Rosie can take it all.

Turning his head slightly, Harry lets his eyes wander over the golden expanse of Rosie's skin, housed by the low cut of his undershirt. It's as if he was carved by the gods. There's not a single flaw in him. He's perfect. Not like Harry, whose head is too big for his shoulders and whose legs are too short for his body.

While at university, he'd sit down in the art library from time to time to get his mind off of his studies. Looking at beautiful things made him refocus, appreciate things from a different perspective. He saw the world in syntax structures and etymologies of ancient words. Artists saw the world in black and white and color and Pythagorean triangles and circles and squares. Artists saw beauty in something as small as an insect and something as large as the planet itself. At times, he was jealous; he couldn't fathom the utopias that artists created from pure imagination.

Shutting his eyes, he tries to imagine one now. One time, he picked up a book that was displayed as part of the library's Renaissance exhibit: a biography of Michelangelo, who'd once said of David, *I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*

Michelangelo may have been born centuries ago, but he was probably speaking about Rosie. A proud nose, an angled jaw, all contributing to a handsome face. But who set Rosie free? He would've never allowed himself to be caught in the first place.

Florence isn't too far from where they are now, compared to the hundreds of miles separating them from home. Once the war is over,

it'd be nice to visit David in person, bring Rosie along so he could get a first-hand comparison. The imagined versus the truth.

Funny; he can't recall the last time he planned for after. He's been too busy trying to survive the present.

A presence above him halts the breeze lapping at his face. When Harry opens his eyes, he's greeted by a morose Rosie staring down at him. It's an objective fact that Rosie is blocking the remnants of the sun, but this must be what it feels like to stare directly at it.

"I'm sorry about earlier, yelling at you," Rosie says. "That was…" He drops his gaze to the patch of dandelions sprouting out from beneath Harry's right armpit. "I was nervous."

As reassuring as it is that Rosie experiences the same emotions that mere mortals do, sadness and Rosie are incompatible. Harry offers the biggest grin his face can manage.

"So, even the great Rosie gets nervous."

"If you only knew." Rosie rests his head against the tree and sighs; that's the first time today. "Thanks for trying to help, Croz."

"Trying?" Harry sits up. "You're giving up?"

Rosie quirks an eyebrow at him. "No."

"But?"

"But." Rosie shrugs. "This was a lot of time out of your day."

"So?"

"So," Rosie says slowly, like he thinks Harry is being purposefully dense; he isn't, for the record. "I don't want to waste your time."

"You can do that by riding around the pond without falling."

"The sun might have something to say about that." Rosie rotates his wristwatch, which managed to survive the day's activities, in Harry's direction. "It's late."

Harry looks between the wristwatch and Rosie's unreadable expression. "So we'll try again tomorrow."

Rosie's face cracks; his signature smile breaks through. "Yes, sir," he

says, throwing up a two-fingered salute before letting his eyes flutter shut, no doubt enjoying this rare moment of peace afforded to him.

It's a cliché, but with the sun setting on the horizon, Rosie looks like a painting that scholars write about in the art history books that Harry used to peruse from time to time. Pinks, yellows, and purples dancing on every surface. Proud nose, angled jaw, and a handsome face.

Harry wants to carve until he sets Rosie free.

To block out the wind, he pulls his jacket tighter around his shoulders —then remembers that his jacket is hanging five feet above his head. He has to swallow hard to tamp down the trembling inside his chest.

Back when he flew on missions, he managed to avoid injury to his vital organs by flak.

This must be what a direct hit would feel like.

On the second day, Rosie keeps his promise and circles the pond precisely one time without falling. Harry figures that would be that— no more mishaps involving ruined uniforms or bicycles stuck in the mud—but Rosie declares that he needs additional practice to achieve consistency. According to him, once is luck, twice is a coincidence, and thrice is a pattern.

If even Rosie relies on luck to get through the day, then where does that leave the rest of them?

Tomorrow turns into two tomorrows, then three and four and five and six. By a week's time, Rosie can travel the path without Harry holding his hand a single time. He's happy for Rosie, glad that he can help a pal out even if he's not sure why he's simultaneously disappointed. It's the routine, he supposes; an excuse to get away from charts and numbers, protractors and pencils.

But what if I have to carry something, Rosie then says, on that seventh day. In one hand, or both hands, he says. What about a bag, or a box, or another person.

Harry asks him why he would be carrying a passenger on his bicycle when everyone who needs to get from point A to point B would own a bicycle of his own, but Rosie convinces him, as any good lawyer

would, that it's better to be prepared. Who is Harry to question Rosie's judgment, anyhow? That's a man who knows what he's talking about.

That's how one week turns into two, and how Harry becomes Rosie's test passenger. He becomes intimate with the alarming speed by which Rosie turns into his corners, as well as Rosie's endearing insistence that Harry keeps his hands on Rosie's waist.

For safety, and for a proper simulation, Rosie tells him. Like training.

Dutifully, Harry wraps his arms around Rosie and thinks to himself, for safety. For proper simulation. For training.

It gets to the point where if Rosie is otherwise detained or Harry has to stay late to plan missions and they can't meet, Harry rolls around on his bunk antsy, body vibrating like the engine of a B-17, nursing an energy that prevents his mind from resting. One night, he stares at the ceiling from dusk until dawn, running mental loops around the pond and not getting a lick of shut-eye.

Three weeks into their arrangement, Rosie flies off into enemy territory, and Harry waits. He hates waiting; always has. What's the use of *waiting* when you can't do anything to help? There's no such thing as an easy mission, only avenues for getting good men killed. He should know—he planned the goddamn routes.

He hates waiting, but above all, he hates feeling left behind.

The entire day, he's so fidgety in his office that Major Kidd orders him to go somewhere else to cool off. He can't stand sitting by himself in the mess hall, the Officers' Club, or on his bunk, so he mounts his bicycle and heads to the pond, pouring rain be damned. Round and round he goes, chasing Rosie's shadow until he has sores on the soles of his feet and blisters where he's clutching the handles too hard.

Looking at his hands reminds him of Rosie's. He hasn't held them in a while.

He doesn't realize he's been half-holding his breath and on the brink of passing out until he sees Rosie's B-17 sputter safely to touchdown, steady as she goes. That's the fastest he's ever darted out onto the airstrip, forgoing the hollers from mechanics offering him a ride and letting his wheels take him as far as the laws of physics will allow.

Rosie's Riveters is up in smoke where it landed, and Harry forgets how to breathe all over again, watching Wynn, then Dodd, then Wilson

being dragged out, clinging to life by the skin of their teeth. Where's Rosie? Where is Rosie?

Where is he?

"Croz."

Harry bumps into a body and whirls around, stumbling backward. Black curls, blue eyes as clear as a summer's day. Proud nose, angled jaw, and a handsome face. A comforting presence that feels like a good friend's embrace.

Peripheral awareness of his surroundings and an inexplicable amount of self-restraint keep him from tackling Rosie to the tarmac right then and there. He opts for a single sucker punch directly to Rosie's shoulder, hard as he can, just to make sure there's something solid there and not a ghost. Rosie takes the blow, not even losing a step because he takes everything life throws at him—flak, gravity, Harry's temper.

"You're here," Harry says, voice wavering. "You're all right." God, he hates it when his voice cracks, but he doesn't give a single damn right now.

"I'm all right," Rosie says. He grips Harry's shoulders, squeezing. "Are *you* all right?"

Harry blinks, finally registering the bruises on Rosie's forehead and around both of his eyes, his split upper lip. "You're bleeding," he says, reaching out, touching Rosie's jaw without thinking, fingers traveling down to his collarbone where his scarf is tainted crimson.

Rosie is bleeding a lot, actually. Maybe the rain makes it look worse than it is. Maybe the rain makes it look better than it is.

Panic rises inside of him, and he starts tearing at Rosie's collar. Source, where's the source—

"Croz, hey, it's okay. It's not mine. See?" Rosie pushes his jacket open, dabbing excessively with a handkerchief until Harry can see pale, unbroken skin. Solid, singular. Harry stares and stares and stares at Rosie's dog tags. They're soaked red, but they remain unbroken too, this precious proof of life dangling around Rosie's neck.

Warm, gloveless hands touch Harry's cheeks, whipped cold by the wind, which makes Harry refocus on Rosie's face as a whole. Even

through the rain and outpour of relieved tears, he can see that it's really Rosie, standing before him. That's what the dog tags would confirm if he could recognize enough of the alphabet to read—Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal is alive.

Rosie's calm voice pulls Harry out of his trance. "I've gotta head to Interrogation," he says.

Interrogation. What a funny word. A questioning, or set of questions. From the Latin *interrogationem*. Interrogation.

Dimly, Harry thinks he should be there for Interrogation too. Isn't that his job? He thinks so. He can't remember.

"Might take a while," Rosie is saying, grimacing. "But I'll see you after, okay? I'll come find you."

Finally, Harry's lungs expand. It's just like in the air: breathe in, and breathe out.

"I'll wait by the usual place," he says. The lessons are probably the last thing on Rosie's mind right now, but Harry needs to see him by their pond for the reality of his existence to sink in.

Somehow, someway, Rosie seems to understand. "The usual place," he says. He cradles the back of Harry's head and shakes him once, firm as a promise. "I'll be there."

Harry keeps his eyes on the jeep that takes Rosie away with the rest of his crew. Rosie returns his gaze the entire way, even after he's long disappeared on the horizon.

After that public display of emotion, word of their private lessons reaches every barracks, down to every personnel member. If he had more foresight, Harry would've seen this coming. Men forced to live and breathe on top of each other in close proximity tend to enjoy gossip when it doesn't involve them.

For example, as Harry walks into Operations: "Good on you, Crosby," Major Kidd says, putting down his coffee to pat Harry's shoulder, a proud lilt in his voice. "Good on you."

For example, after Harry sits down to enjoy his whiskey: "Riding

lessons, huh?" Douglass insinuates, waggling his eyebrows. Blakely doesn't say anything, but he's waggling just as excessively next to him. A pair of jokesters, the two of them.

For example, whenever Harry is in the vicinity of the airstrip: "I'm happy for you, sir," Lemmons says, smiling sweetly at him. Harry swears that he's never seen Lemmons anywhere else; grease is his home.

To all of them, Harry says, "Uh-huh," then redirects the conversation elsewhere because aside from waiting, aside from being the last man standing, the thing he hates the most is being the center of attention.

Much to his chagrin, even Colonel Harding joins in on the absurdity, letting it slip in the middle of a debrief that he's happy that "his two best men are getting along swell."

"Like the Buckys, sir?" Harry says, tiredly. Putting him in the same category as Rosie is ridiculous enough, but leaving out the Buckys, even if they're MIA? Talk about pure fantasy.

Colonel Harding strokes his chin, contemplative. "It's that serious?"

"Um," Harry says, baffled. Yeah, he would think that forgetting about the Buckys is serious. "Yes, sir."

"That's good to hear," Colonel Harding says. "That's good to hear."

Harry has no idea what *that's* all about.

"Why don't they ever bother you?" Harry complains, a month in.

"You're too nice, Croz."

"I don't try to be," Harry sulks.

"Well, you are." Rosie raises his hat. "Hey, professor. Quit slacking and help me out, will you?"

Harry sighs and stands up. He'd been sitting on the side of the pond, attempting to skip rocks across the surface while Rosie rode around him. Rosie can turn, brake, speed up, slow down, even hop onto the seat after a running start. He can carry a bag, a box, and a whole damn person without losing his balance. Truth be told, Harry's not

sure what he's still doing here.

"What do you need?" he says.

Rosie gestures to the space behind him; Harry's space.

Harry glances at it with disinterest. At least, he tries to. His heart seems to have other ideas, with the way it keeps running away from him anytime Rosie asks him for anything, talks to him about anything. In all honesty, Rosie doesn't even have to speak—Rosie just has to be there, smiling that smile of his next to him or in his thoughts.

Even though he knows this is pointless, even though he knows Rosie doesn't need the practice anymore, he hops on. For safety, he thinks, as he puts his arms around Rosie's waist, resting his head against the reliable fortress of Rosie's shoulder. For safety, for proper simulation, and for training.

Instead of turning left to go around the pond again, Rosie takes a right. Harry's not sure where Rosie is going, and he's surprised to realize how much he doesn't care. He trusts Rosie to not lead him down a path that he wouldn't want to tread.

It's so easy to tune out the rest of the world when Rosie's in command. Perhaps it's unfair to him—Lord knows Rosie carries the weight of humanity on his shoulders—but Harry doesn't know how to share it; if Rosie would even want the help. Even now, Harry is dead weight on Rosie's vessel.

Sometimes, he wonders what would've happened if he came up as part of Rosie's crew, or was assigned to him for a mission. Would he have messed it up, as he's prone to do? Would he have given Rosie the wrong coordinates, led him to his demise? Is the reason Rosie is here and not somewhere out there because Harry wasn't there to fuck it up?

He'd like to think that Rosie would've been able to overcome his flaws, but that's not how it should be. Take these supposed lessons—Harry didn't contribute anything other than two hands and a tumble into uncharted waters.

"Say," he says, gathering up the courage to breach the topic. "How long are we doing this for, anyway?"

"However long it takes," Rosie says. So succinct, and yet so vague. Harry doesn't know what it means.

"You're not…" Harry inhales slowly, searching for the right word. He's always searching for the right word, these days. "Bored?"

"Are you?"

Harry could lie, but that would be worse, so he shakes his head, hoping Rosie can feel it so he won't have to say the words. These trips to the pond have become an important part of his life. Rosie has become an important part of his life. Disrupting it would throw his rhythm into disarray.

If Rosie knew what Harry was thinking, he'd launch into a jazz metaphor. Harry would try to keep up, but Rosie would be too fast with his syncopation and two-five-one progressions and dominant diminished scales.

Here, in the moment, Rosie rolls to a standstill, one leg keeping them upright. He's become really good at that.

Harry lifts his head, rubbing the imprint of Rosie's uniform collar on his cheeks as he looks around. He widens his eyes. They're back at the barracks. Harry's barracks, to be specific.

"You looked tired," Rosie says, like this is something they've been doing since the beginning—like carrying Harry all the way from one side of the base to the other is a perfectly normal occurrence.

Harry gets off of the bicycle. He doesn't trust his impulse control when he's on it, his heart so close to being overheard: *thump thump thump*.

"How was my form?" Rosie jokes.

Harry gives him a smile he doesn't feel. "A-plus."

Rosie chuckles. "You're a good teacher." It's spoken from the depths of his heart and he means it, is the thing. He means it and Harry can't deal with it.

"It was all you," Harry says, before he can think better of it.

For the briefest of seconds, Rosie looks at him funny, with an expression as unreadable as that very first day beneath the tree. Under the moonlight, it's hard to tell what he's thinking—unfair, considering that Harry has spent an entire month with him and hasn't gotten any closer to cracking the code.

"I'll walk you," Rosie says, which is unquestionably ridiculous—the entrance to the barracks is five steps away.

Rosie parks his bicycle and walks those five steps with Harry. At the door, Harry turns around to bid Rosie good night, see you tomorrow, maybe, if they're still doing this song and dance; and maybe there's a melody that Rosie started long ago, maybe he's playing a rhythm of his own and he can't stop, but Rosie swings close to him, notes in suspension. Instinctively, Harry closes his eyes. He can feel Rosie's breath on his mouth, that quiet anticipation before the soloist tells his story in the only way he can.

What he gets, instead, are two hands on his shoulders; squeezing, like the day Rosie came back to him.

Harry opens his eyes. "Rosie," he says. *Thump thump thump.* He doesn't know what else to say.

"Thanks again, Croz," Rosie says, voice soft. He steps back, then again, on repeat; then, he's on his bicycle, smooth as butter, and he's gone.

"Don't mention it," Harry says to the wind.

Things keep getting stuck in his throat, lately.

The next morning, he finds his bicycle parked in its usual spot, ten spaces down from the door of the barracks, and wonders if he had dreamt the entire evening. He's out there by the pond, chasing Rosie's shadow while his body sleeps.

Then, he looks closer. A note, stuck between the left handlebar and the bell: *See you later, professor*, in Rosie's elegant scrawl.

Harry looks around: to his left, to his right, behind him, at the bicycle, then back at the note. After he pinches himself, he tucks the note inside his breast pocket.

Thump thump thump.

"You two are still at it, huh?" Douglass says, chewing happily on his

chow. He's the only person Harry knows who actually likes the taste of burnt beans. The acidic makeup of his stomach would lay waste to fields in an instant.

"Six weeks and counting," Harry says, head propped up on his hand as he pushes the beans around on his plate with a spoon. Six of the most agonizingly blissful and confusing weeks of his life.

Douglass whistles. "It's been that long? What the hell have you been doing?"

That's a question that Harry has been asking himself more and more recently. What the hell have they been doing?

Harry shrugs a shoulder and works on creating a volcano with his mashed potatoes. "The man can evade fifty airborne Germans but not a bump in the road."

Douglass frowns. "I saw him ride over to greet the new guys yesterday. He seems to be doing fine to me."

"Oh, I agree. But that's what he said when I told him he doesn't need my help anymore." Harry bumps his voice up a notch. "'*Got taken out by a mound of dirt, would you believe it? Guess I'm more of a klutz than you gave me credit for.*'"

"Rosie said that?"

"Who else?"

"Oh."

Harry looks up from his half-finished volcano. Douglass is a lot of things, but deceptive is not one of them. He is the definition of an open book; one glance at his face and you can tell that he's hiding something.

Harry puts down his spoon. "Well, don't keep it all to yourself."

Douglass does not look at him. He forks three more disgusting spoonfuls of beans into his mouth in rapid succession.

"Douglass."

"Hmrh?" Douglass replies around his spoon.

"What were you about to say?"

"Hmrh nahhhfffff—"

"I'm not a moose, Douglass." Harry makes a face. "Also, don't chew with your mouth open."

Douglass gives Harry what can only be described as a stink eye, then swallows his food down with a gulp of water, taking his sweet damn time wiping off with a napkin. "Nothing," he says, anticlimactically.

Harry throws up his hands, almost knocking his plate onto the floor. "Oh, come on."

"Save your breath. I'm not saying shit."

"I'll let you have my razor."

Douglass narrows his eyes. "The gold-plated one?"

"You said you were keen on it," Harry says. Ever since Douglass begged him to let him give it a whirl, he hasn't stopped yapping about how smooth it felt on his delicate and sensitive skin.

"Hmm." Douglass takes another bite of chow, takes another gulp of water. "Tempting, but the answer's still nothing."

Harry taps his fingers on the table, mentally going through all of his replaceable toiletries. "I'll throw in my Barbasol."

"I said no, Croz. I'm staying out of affairs of the heart. Go ask the man yourself, if you're so curious." Douglass whips his head up, peering over Harry. "Excuse me," he says, then picks up his plate and hop-sprints over to the other side of the mess hall, shouting, "Hey, Ev!"

Harry glares at Douglass' happy-go-lucky ass flinging himself onto a Blakely who's just trying to receive his chow. The sight makes his stomach twist all funny-like, so he diverts his annoyance at the unappetizing pool of beans on his plate.

"Affairs of the heart?" he asks the beans.

The beans don't reply.

Black curls, blue eyes as clear as a summer's day. Proud nose, angled jaw, and a handsome face. Two hands on Harry's shoulders, squeezing;

breath on Harry's mouth, intermingling.

A comforting presence that feels like a good friend's embrace.

Harry, Rosie says, leaning in all the way.

With a wretched gasp, Harry jolts awake. It's five on the dot, the sun just starting to come out and the birds just starting to sing. Panting, he blinks at the ceiling and pulls his sheets over his face, taking in belabored breaths until he's come to terms with the fire inside his belly, the booming inside his ribcage—*thump thump thump*.

It always did take a wake-up call for him to notice what's been in front of him all along.

"Rosie," Harry recites to the dandelion in his hand, "I think I care for you as more than a brother."

At the edge of the pond, he stops. That doesn't sound right.

"Rosie," he tries again, turning around to restart his pacing, "I think I care for you as more than a friend."

This time, he stops beneath the tree and listens to the leaves whistling above, growing greener by the day. That's closer to the truth, but it still doesn't sound right. Rosie doesn't deserve half-measures.

He stares at his hands, wistfully thinking about the way they'd feel in Rosie's.

"Rosie," he whispers, joining one palm against the other, dandelion folded in between, "I think I care for you as I would a wife."

That sounds right.

But he can't say that, and he won't. How could he? What if he's wrong—what if this is how everyone comes to feel about Rosie because it's *Rosie*, and not because of anything spectacular that Harry did?

Everyone falls in love with Rosie, just a little.

"Croz," Rosie says from somewhere behind him, making Harry jump out of his skin.

"Rosie!" Harry stammers. "You're, uh—you're early." He smooths out his uniform jacket, takes off his hat, puts it on again. Drops the dandelion, because it's been kneaded to a pulp.

"I could say the same about you." Rosie shoots him a peculiar look, followed by a goofy smirk. "You were that eager to get out of the office today, huh?"

And that's the crux of it all, Harry thinks, as Rosie pats him on the arm and rides off. He thought this would be a simple flyover, swoop in and go home. Weeks later, he's lost sight of his mission, his heart all jumbled up like a sailor's knot.

If he's honest, however, it isn't so much that he's forgotten, but that he's only now realizing what his mission was to begin with. From the start, it was never about the request itself, but who walked up to him in the Officers' Club. Now that he knows the exact circumference of Rosie's waist, could map out the distance with his eyes closed, he can't go back to imagining. He knows the truth.

During training, one of the most memorable lessons he had was to never be caught between life and death. Should he be shot down, always be ready for one extreme over the other. Floating in limbo space is when the human mind is the most vulnerable: you never know what you'll do out of desperation.

This feels like that, but instead of falling out of the sky, he imagines it more like a defective record. There's a scratch before the final verse and the needle is stuck, skipping by the same note again and again and again.

Harry lifts the needle.

"You said once that you didn't want to waste my time," he says, as Rosie finishes off another lap. "What do you call all this, then?"

For the first time in a long while, Rosie wobbles into a turn. "What do you mean?"

Harry scoffs. "What do I mean? What do I mean—let's see, how about this?" Inserting himself directly into Rosie's path, he looks Rosie head-on, feet planted. He's not afraid—Rosie would never hurt him.

As expected, Rosie nicks barely a thread off of Harry's uniform as he swerves in a crescent around him and skids to a convincing stop without even using his brakes. A true professional.

"Nice form," Harry says, walking up to him. He brushes off the dust that kicked up to his sleeves.

Rosie shifts on his bicycle, one foot on the ground. "I was lucky."

Harry shakes his head. "You said thrice is a pattern."

"You've never jumped in front of me before."

"You want me to do it again?"

"And what would that accomplish?"

"Prove my point, that it's not luck." Harry's the king of luck—he should know.

Rosie sighs. "What was I supposed to do, crash into you?"

"I'm glad you didn't. But I'm willing to bet that I could throw myself in front of you and you'd do the same thing every time. You would've done it yesterday. A week ago. Hell, two weeks ago. What's going on, Rosie? Do you—"

Harry bites back a groan, unsure of what he wants to ask. Do you know how much I care for you? Do you know and you're too kind to let me down? Or are you actually clueless? In a way, that might be worse.

"What are we doing here?" he settles on.

Rosie grips the handles on his bicycle, looking for a moment like he's warring between two answers. "I suppose I owe you an explanation," he says, after a beat.

"I suppose you do." Abrupt concern flares up in Harry's stomach, an unfortunate Pavlovian response he's developed when envisioning borderline catastrophic, worst-case scenarios. "Oh god, you really are dying, aren't you?"

"What? No, Croz. I'm not dying." Rosie sounds as confused as he had the first time the thought entered Harry's mind, which is the only reason Harry believes him.

"Okay," Harry says. "Good."

"I'm planning on walking out of this war alive, as a matter of fact."

Despite himself, Harry lets out a small laugh. "Good."

"Good." Rosie cuts his gaze away, and Harry holds his breath. As much as he'd like to put this entire matter to bed, he also doesn't want to torment his friend. After everything that Rosie has done for the Bloody Hundredth, the war effort, Harry himself—he's earned himself a few secrets.

But the selfish part of Harry really, really, really wants to know. Even if it's not what he wants to hear, even if he has to return to being buried in pencil shavings and it won't ever be the same with Rosie again—knowing is better than lamenting what could have been. That's the motto he's been raised on and has continued to live by.

That's what he tells himself, but the tiny, stubborn spark of hope that's nestled inside his chest like shrapnel also thinks he hasn't misread the situation. He hasn't misread the ride to the barracks, the five steps to the door, or the excruciating closeness between them. The casual touches, the carefree laughter, the rapid pulse coursing through his veins—all of these signs point to one coordinate on his map. If there's the slimmest fraction of a chance that this is headed where he's hoping… well, he's not a mathematician, but he is an optimist at heart, so he'll take those odds.

"You can tell me anything," Harry says, turning Rosie's face with his hand, hoping and hoping and hoping. If there's an available star, he'll wish on that. "Anything."

Rosie leans into Harry's touch, eyelashes fluttering once. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"You, afraid?" Harry feels his lips quirk up. "That doesn't sound like the Rosie I know."

"I don't think I know him either," Rosie says, breath warm on Harry's skin. "But I do know that I like who I am when I'm around you."

"Rosie," Harry says, quiet. He's said that name so many times, over cola and whiskey, beautiful sunset skies, the starry night. This is the first time he notices how Rosie responds: with the same fond look that Rosie directs at him every time Harry shows up at the pond.

"Croz," Rosie says, equally quiet—and he's called Harry that so many times, but this is how Harry responds now: with the same joy that lights up his heart every time he sees Rosie waiting for him. It reminds him of how he felt when he survived his first mission.

With conviction and a little love, people can survive anything.

Harry crosses his arms to steady himself, pretending to be put-upon. "You could've just talked to me."

"I don't usually do things like this," Rosie says, sheepish.

"Play dumb?"

"Make a fool out of myself in a poor attempt to court someone."

Affection bursts inside Harry's chest, tingling him from head to toe. "You're not a fool," he says, smiling; he can't seem to stop. "But you could've just talked to me. I would've said yes a long time ago."

The English literature student in him is faintly aware that this is the worst confession he could've drawn up, but he thinks a fella can't be blamed for losing his senses when he's having a goddamn revelation six weeks too late. Sometimes, you simply lack the words to describe how you're feeling.

Anyhow, Rosie is smart as a whip. He'll figure it out.

"And miss out on your words of wisdom?" Rosie tilts his head, eyes squinting in that adorable way that makes his nose scrunch up. "What was it you said? '*If you stay upright, you won't fall*.'"

Harry laughs, shoving Rosie on the shoulder. "It worked, didn't it?"

Rosie raises an eyebrow. "Did it?"

They playfight for a bit, hands squabbling and laughter ringing out, and Harry thinks he couldn't possibly be happier—and then Rosie stills Harry's hand in his own, touching their foreheads together, and that's it. Harry's shot out of a cannon and over the moon.

"So," Harry says, heart beating like Rosie's beloved Gene Krupa drum solos: *thump thump thump*. "However long it takes, huh?"

Rosie brushes Harry's hair aside, thumb caressing his cheekbone. "Never gave up."

According to Harry's distant memory, Michelangelo once said of life, *There is no greater harm than that of time wasted*. Well, Harry is no artist or famed musician or superhero, but he knows words. Tolkien once said the same through the guise of a wise old wizard: *All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.*

So Harry follows his heart, and he gives in to the rush of the fall: head-over-heels.

Balancing his weight carefully, he pushes himself onto his tiptoes and takes Rosie's face in his hands, planting the deepest kiss he can on Rosie's lips.

Hmm. He's never kissed a man before, but it's sort of like reading a new book that's destined to become a favorite. With time, the spine and pages will bend to the weight of his fingers; so, too, will the contours of Rosie's mouth come to fit against his, along with his proud nose, his angled jaw, and his handsome face.

Harry pulls back. "How was my form?"

"Ah," Rosie says, pink in the cheeks. "A-plus." There's no liquor to blame it on, but it could be the sunset. He could also be developing a fever.

As any scholar worth his damn would do, Harry kisses Rosie again—to verify the source of Rosie's blush, of course; slower, savoring it, like he did a drop of water after a day in the Algerian desert. Rosie's hands come up to find Harry's shoulders once more, squeezing.

There's no such thing as ironclad certainty in life, but Harry is pretty certain that there was more to Rosie's request than a simple favor. All this time, he was worried about disrupting Rosie's rhythm when in reality, Rosie was inviting him to join a duet.

Harry laughs when they part, pleased and only slightly smug that he, Harry H. Crosby, can elicit such a dazed reaction from Rosie.

Rosie the Indomitable, stunned into silence. What a sight.

"Race you back to base," Harry whispers into Rosie's ear before hopping onto his bicycle and pedaling away, utterly unbothered by the knowledge that Rosie will catch up to him sooner rather than later.

He's a good teacher, after all.

End Notes

i love them so very dearly. if you love them too, please come yodel about them with me, either in the comments or on tumblr!

fic notes:
- "rosie the indomitable" is a direct quote from crosby's memoir!!!
- quotes from michelangelo taken from here
- etymology of "interrogation" from here
- the tolkien quote is from *lord of the rings: the fellowship of the ring*, spoken by gandalf; it's also a nod to the fact that anthony boyle was in the 2019 tolkien movie
- (edit 4/22/24: WHOOPS i just realized i accidentally looked at the publication date for the hobbit and lotr wasn't published until the 1950s… let's just ignore that lol)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!